

## Let's Hear It For the Boy

By Bruce Oliver

A recent **CBS Sunday Morning** segment titled "As Gender Roles Change, Are Men Out of Step?" focused on a "crisis" in education that is not receiving as much publicity or press as other issues. The piece highlighted the widening achievement gap between boys and girls. Information presented in the feature included:

- Boys are not enrolling in or graduating from college at the same rate as girls
- College enrollment for boys has been declining for the past four decades dropping from 57.7% in the 1970's to the current rate of 43.5%
- Only 30% of high school valedictorians are boys
- An "anti-intellectualism movement" is taking place as more and more young men believe it is not "cool" to be smart

The report led to a deeper investigation of the topic to determine not just why the problem exists but what educators might do to avert what some prognosticators have concluded is expected to get worse unless the situation is addressed. Additional findings were:

- Boys' dropout rate from high school is on the increase
- Adolescent boys have a higher prevalence of obesity than girls
- Adolescent boys have an ADHD diagnosis rate that is three times that of adolescent girls

With further probing, I quickly learned that the problem is not unique to the United States but is also occurring in other countries around the globe. I discovered the writings of William A. Draves, president of the **Learning Resources Network (LERN)**, an international education association. In his article, "Why Boys Under-Perform in School," Draves notes that the lack of productivity by boys in schools is a recent phenomenon that did not occur 30-60 years ago. As he compares the performances of boys versus girls in schools, he concludes that boys are not inherently inferior academically, that the parents of girls are not emphasizing good academic habits when compared to boys, and that the problem is not a result of social problems such as divorce or single parent homes. He states "teen crime is down to a 30-year record low. Teen pregnancy is down. School violence is at an all time low. Teen drunken driving is down. Teen unemployment is up. Teen driving fatalities are down. Television viewing is down. Reading is up. Yet everyone knows boys are behaving poorly."

Draves points to possible explanations as to why, for many boys, school is what he calls a "battleground." He acknowledges that boys have a penchant for skills and attributes which go hand-in-hand with a future dominated by the Internet including "taking risks, being entrepreneurial, and being individualistic," behaviors which are not the norm in most schools but which lend themselves to success in today's workplace. There seems to be a definite discrepancy between the conformity and adherence to structure that exists in most of today's classrooms when compared to the acceptable behaviors in the

prevailing work environment cited above. Many K-12 classrooms tend to reward self-control, verbal and written communication, and the ability to express oneself clearly. These are all qualities that girls tend to be better at when compared with their male counterparts. According to sociologist Michael Kimmel in the **CBS Sunday Morning** segment, "Boys think that academic disengagement is a sign of masculinity. The less connected you are, the more manly you are."

Educators have employed a variety of approaches to address the disengagement problem. Some schools have included single-sex classes in their master schedules with varying results. Research studies have found that the benefits of such structures remain unclear and have yielded no definitive answers about their overall effectiveness. **The Boys Initiative**, a national campaign to promote achievement and health among males, has been established to address issues in a collaborative manner by working with different agencies and individuals who show promise for change. Some colleges are even employing an affirmative action movement to attract and maintain more males at their institutions. Still others view the situation not as a crisis but as part of an evolution in our culture to redefine what it means to be male in our society.

Despite the bleak picture that the data paints, there are definite practices that educators can follow that can have an impact on male productivity and that can result in a turnaround in the academic performance of boys. Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley, authors of the book **Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys** have conducted extensive research involving secondary school teachers and their work with male students. One overriding conclusion that they have reached is that the relationships that teachers form with adolescent boys are the key to success in reaching them. They emphasize the fact that success with boys is not a "random occurrence" but instead includes teacher behaviors that can make a difference. Among their findings are the following:

- It is important for teachers to be proactive in reaching out to meet students' needs rather than appearing to be seemingly aloof and uninterested in them
- When teachers acknowledge and show an interest in their individual passions and talents, boys are much more likely to be drawn to their teacher
- Students tend to respond better to teachers who demonstrate a clear pedagogical mastery of their content
- Achievement by male students does not occur without the establishment of good classroom management skills coupled with "demanding (yet attainable) standards for classroom conduct and work"
- Teachers who show their vulnerability by opening up about a personal flaw or weakness have a greater chance of reaching disengaged students
- When teachers resist personalizing boys' negative behaviors, and instead respond with "restraint and civility," they are more likely to transform a student's negative demeanor

Reichert and Hawley, as well as other professionals, provide a greater understanding of what teachers can do as they carry out their lessons that can make a difference in students' commitment to learning. Below are some strategies educators suggest that may promote better learning for all students with a specific emphasis on boys:

- Boys tend to become disengaged or disruptive when teachers employ ineffective teaching methods. Astute teachers who observe such behavior changes have adopted a "self-correcting style." When lesson adjustments occur, students tend to view their teacher as more committed to their learning
- Adding movement as part of the learning experiences can stave off boredom. Movement might include going to different locations or stations in the classroom, changing groups, or even brief physical exercises
- When teachers include more visuals during lessons, the result can be a greater connection to the learning experience
- Giving students a choice in the selection and use of materials can lead to better focus on lesson content
- When lessons culminate in a product or way for students to summarize their learning, student productivity may increase since there is a specific target in mind
- Teachers who turn learning into a "game" can have a greater likelihood of reaching their students
- When lessons contain surprises or novelty, as well as a teachers' ability to demonstrate humor or lighthearted behavior, student attention will increase
- Boys have demonstrated greater engagement when teachers deliberately include typical masculine values and social issues in their lessons especially when boys may be required to increase a personal realization or connection to the content under study
- When boys are put in a position to teach other students, they take their responsibility more seriously
- Providing a variety of reading materials that includes sports, mystery or adventure and that may appeal to boys' interests can increase involvement in classroom activities

Claudia Buchmann, professor of sociology at Ohio State University says that to address the problem will take a unified effort by school personal and parents alike. In Daryl Nelson's article, "Girls Are Thrashing Boys in Academic Achievement. How Come?" Buchmann says that it will be necessary to "drill into boys' heads that running away from academic achievement isn't a manly thing to do, it's just plain dumb." Additionally, she states, "Schools need to break down the gendered stereotypes that say real men don't work hard in school." As Jennifer Delahunty concludes at the end of the **CBS Sunday Morning** segment, "Let's throw 'boys will be boys' out the door; it doesn't serve us anymore."

The impact of boys' negative responses to their learning environments varies from school to school. Not all schools are experiencing the crisis. If, however, the problem does exist, professionals cannot simply ignore the situation and allow the status quo to remain in place. There are ample suggestions that teachers can follow that have the potential to reverse the trend, and even unforeseen solutions that may emerge from professional dialogues. Let the conversations begin.

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